

Message

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NWI Times EPA gets earful at East Chicago public hearing, extends comment period for DuPont site cleanup

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EPA gets earful at East Chicago public hearing, extends comment period for DuPont site cleanup

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EAST CHICAGO — Homeowners living north of an industrial property formerly operated by the DuPont chemical company gave EPA an earful Wednesday night, questioning the adequacy of a proposed \$22.6 million plan to reduce exposures in and around the arsenic- and lead- contaminated site.

Contaminated soil and polluted groundwater are among the major concerns at the 440-acre former DuPont site at 5215 Kennedy Ave., once used to manufacture chemicals.

The Environmental Protection Agency's \$22.6 million cleanup plan will be paid for by the site owner, Chemours Co. and the site is under EPA's Resource Conservation and Recovery Act program.

The plan includes long-term monitoring, removing soil, installing a 1-foot-thick permeable soil cover, treating groundwater, fencing and compliance with industrial zoning requirements and receiving financial assurances from the site owner, EPA has said.

About 50 people attended Wednesday's meeting.

Sam Henderson, staff attorney for the Hoosier Environmental Council, argued the EPA's planned institutional controls are not protective enough, noting the serious threat of contaminated groundwater migration to adjacent neighborhoods, already home to the USS Lead Superfund site.

Henderson deeply criticized EPA's plan, arguing nearby neighborhoods will essentially serve "as a sponge" for toxic groundwater, despite the installation of a barrier.

EPA under a separate Superfund program is investigating the potential for groundwater contamination in basements and homes. Residents and environmental attorneys at the meeting argued it would be premature to approve a plan that doesn't take the findings of that investigation and others into consideration.

Groundwater from the DuPont site flows north toward the East Calumet neighborhood.

Maritza Lopez, a lifelong resident of East Calumet, said EPA this past year found contaminated water had seeped into her basement. It's proof that the barrier wall for DuPont is "not working," she said.

Debbie Chizewer, an attorney at Northwestern University Pritzker Law School's Environmental Law Clinic working pro bono on behalf of residents of the nearby USS Lead Superfund site, said EPA's assertion that basement seepage is no risk to families is deeply flawed.

Water from basement sump pumps could be re-contaminating soil outside as it flows into families' yards, she said.

Jennifer Dodds, project manager for the DuPont site, said the agency has crafted a cleanup plan that lowers cancer risks to an acceptable level and that EPA is using technology that has shown "promising results" in reducing the amount of arsenic migrating off site.

That, coupled with long-term monitoring and the excavation of hot spots with arsenic concentrations above 1,000 parts per million to reduce groundwater contamination, is adequate, she said.

EPA's method for assessing health risks was another top concern aired Wednesday.

EPA toxicologist Bhooma Sundar explained EPA assessed health risks at the DuPont site by taking into account the severity of soil contamination, the likelihood for exposure and toxicity of the substances. They found health risks to be negligible.

"This is not an exact science. It's mostly estimation. Probability," Sundar said.

The DuPont site has been under the EPA's radar since the early 1980s, but a cleanup plan wasn't proposed until recently.

"When will this nightmare of contamination end? DuPont has been contaminating my neighborhood, my family, my friends, for more than 40 years," Lopez said. "EPA has known about this DuPont site for more than 30 years. EPA issued a corrective action order 20 years ago to no avail."

Despite EPA etching out time to present the project's scope, there appeared to be more questions than there were answers Wednesday night.

In response to recent criticisms about the lack of project documentation available online, EPA agreed to extend the public comment period, set to end later this month, another 60 days — or until March 11.

The announcement comes just days after the agency began posting supporting documents on the site's website at the community's requests.

